‘I was made for loving you’: ‘Kiss’ as perpetual capitalist entertainment product

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Abstract: Bryer (1994, 1995, 1999, 2006) writes that the goal of accounting under capitalism is to serve capital by the regular reporting of the rate of return on capital to equity holders. For Jinnai (2009), following Karl Marx, accounting is the ‘brain’ or the ‘self-consciousness’ of capital as a living organism. This paper is a collective effort on the part of the authors to remember ‘Kiss’, one of the greatest shock-rock bands of the mid- to late-1970s. The Corporate Kiss Machine turned over USD111 million in calendar year 1978 alone, equal to that of a Fortune 500 company, half of which was from merchandising. In accounting and financial terms the Kiss of the mid- to late-1970s was a huge success, achieving the goal of capitalist self-valorisation to an extent previously unimaginable. Kiss branched out beyond sales of musical product to sales of a vast array of merchandise and memorabilia which nearly certainly has not been surpassed by any band in terms of the quantity and the range of items sold. Kiss showed how far it was possible to extend and exploit the concept of a band for the purpose of capital accumulation. This paper also looks at the band’s use of ‘American Dream’ ideology to assist its success.

Keywords: Marxism; Kiss; rock music; popular music; popular culture; capital accumulation; authenticity; capitalism; commodification.

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1 Introduction

Bryer (1994,1995,1999, 2006) writes that the goal of accounting under capitalism is to serve capital by the regular reporting of the rate of return on capital to equity holders. For Jinnai (2009), following Karl Marx, accounting is the ‘brain’ or the ‘self-consciousness’ of capital as a living organism. This paper is a collective effort on the part of the authors to remember ‘Kiss’, one of the greatest shock-rock bands of the mid- to late-1970s. The Corporate Kiss Machine turned over USD111 million in calendar year 1978 alone, equal to that of a Fortune 500 company, half of which was from merchandising. In accounting and financial terms the Kiss of the mid- to late-1970s was a huge success, achieving the goal of capitalist self-valorisation to an extent previously unimaginable. Kiss branched out beyond sales of musical product to sales of a vast array of merchandise and memorabilia which nearly certainly has not been surpassed by any band in terms of the quantity and the range of items sold. Kiss showed how far it was possible to extend and exploit the concept of a band for the purpose of capital accumulation. The band is one of modern capitalism’s greatest and most surprising of success stories. The band demonstrated that capitalism could successfully control areas of human activity previously only on the fringes of mainstream capitalist economy. The authors also look at the band’s use of ‘American Dream’ ideology to assist its success. We trace the use of ‘American Dream’ ideology within official Kiss discourse back to 1985.

This paper undertakes a somewhat daunting task: to explore Kiss as a sociological phenomenon within late capitalist America from a Marxist and existentialist perspective. Our other purpose is to ‘remember Kiss’ from the viewpoint of the authors Generation-X people who became infatuated with the fearsome foursome, at the height of their powers, back in the late-1970s. We then aim to integrate the scholarly and the personal reflection parts of the article into a reasonably coherent whole following on in the tradition of the various philosophers who contributed to the recent edited book Metallica and Philosophy: a Crash Course in Brain Surgery (Irwin, 2007).

Kiss was originally formed in New York City in 1972, out of the remains of the mediocre bar band Wicked Lester, and it has endured, in one form or another, for almost 40 years. Band leaders Gene Simmons (bass) and Paul Stanley (guitar) have been the only members of Kiss present since its inception. Arguably, the band redefined popular entertainment, operating according to Simmons’ own self-styled and extremely effective principles for a Capitalist Entertainment Product suitable for his own North American consumer market. We assert that Kiss should be viewed as a qualitative, rather than merely a quantitative, change [Mao, (1971), pp.123–124] in the creation of musical entertainment product, wherein the form(s) of the product have already begun to outweigh in importance the musical content of the actual standardised three-minute rock songs.
Of course, the concept of music as musical entertainment product pre-dates Kiss. Important examples from music history include Elvis; the Rolling Stones; Led Zeppelin; Black Sabbath; Slade and, at the more extreme end of the spectrum, Screamin’ Jay Hawkins; Screaming Lord Sutch; Black Widow (Leicester, England); Alice Cooper; the New York Dolls; and the Sex Pistols. Similarly, bands pre-dating and post-dating Kiss, from Elvis to Creedence Clearwater Revival to Led Zeppelin to the Clash to Biohazard to Linkin Park to Eminem, have colonised an era of black rock music and given it a white face. A member of the New York Dolls has dismissed Kiss’ makeup and (limited) cross-dressing as ‘heterosexual white boys from the suburbs’, implying that, unlike the New York Dolls, the use of makeup and cross-dressing by Kiss was purely a stage-act rather than a sincere struggle to form and understand one’s own gender and one’s position in the world [Sylvain Sylvain of the New York Dolls, cited in Makowski, (2010), p.40].

2 Kiss and the ‘American Dream’ ideology

The authors of the present paper examine how Gene Simmons, founding member and bassist of Kiss, has not only positioned Kiss as marketable capitalist commodity, but has done so in such a way that it conforms to his own understanding of the (ideology of the) ‘American Dream’. The American Dream ideology, as recently promoted by Simmons and Stanley, relies on the notion of the Working Man going back to his home after a hard day of work to his loving spouse or partner. As the Kiss song ‘Uh All Night’, from the 1985 Asylum album, states unambiguously, ‘if you work all day you gotta’ uh all night’. On the 1992 Revenge album, founding member and guitarist Paul Stanley credited the song ‘Take It Off’ to the ‘hardworking women in the strip clubs’, and there is no reason to suppose that the word ‘hardworking’ here is used in any kind of mocking or insincere fashion [cited in Leaf and Sharp, (2003), p.391]. This honouring of the American work ethic had not been fully developed in Kiss’ early years when the ‘rock and roll all night and party everyday’ ethos prevailed. Leaf and Sharp (2003, p.2) state that the early 1975 song ‘Rock and Roll All Nite’ (from the band’s third studio album Dressed to Kill) sums up not only the band’s appeal but also its ‘philosophy’ about life. This ethos, however, failed to provide a satisfactory ethical basis or ideology or worldview for Kiss once the band members reached middle-age and was forced to compete with large numbers of younger and often musically more proficient bands. After two decades in rock music latter-day Kiss can only survive as a self-conscious institution which constantly refers back to and reifies itself. This can be seen from the restoration of the make-up and the original four members of the band for the 1996 reunion tour and the endless subsequent ‘reunion’/‘farewell’ tours which continue on through the present.

The honouring of the work ethic is more consistent with the personalities and ideologies of the totally focused Simmons and Stanley rather than the more erratic and idiosyncratic ‘party-animals’ Ace Frehley (guitar) and Peter Criss (drums) who have always been less willing than Simmons and Stanley to view Kiss in careerist terms or as personal fulfilment of the American Dream. Frehley and Criss, both original Kiss members but now no longer with the band, are both traditional musicians who live out the haphazard and spontaneous lifestyles and attitudes of rock and roll cliché. They have both consumed nearly all of their vast fortunes in ridiculously extravagant consumerism, drugs, and alcohol. A band such as Kiss can successfully maximise the rate of return on
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capital but ‘equity holders’ such as Frehley and Criss (originally they were both entitled to literal 25% share of profits) prove that it is hard for the corporate logic of efficiency to fully colonise all the dark corners of the ‘outlaw’ world of rock and roll.¹ By contrast, Simmons and Stanley have always been extremely determined and dedicated to see Kiss establish itself as a worldwide success and income generator and they have largely kept their personal consumptions under control. Their inflated egos have been dedicated to band promotion and income generation rather than been allowed to completely run amuck in non-strategic and self-harming fashion (like those of Frehley and Criss). In interviews, both Stanley and Simmons come across as more articulate, self-consciously reflexive, and self-controlled than the vast majority of rock musicians. Leaf and Sharp (2003, p.46) write that: “Perhaps more than anything else, it is Gene’s ambition that fuelled KISS’s rise to the top”. The same authors add that: “Gene’s self-confidence has always been one of the key elements that propelled KISS to success” [Leaf and Sharp, (2003), p.49]. Leaf and Sharp (2003, p.222) document Simmons stating that troubles within the band regarding the behaviours and attitudes of Frehley and Criss began as early as the Hotter than Hell recording sessions, held in Los Angeles in the northern fall of 1974, before the band had even secured its first gold-selling record. It appears that Simmons and Stanley were always opposed to Frehley and Criss in inter-band strife and Frehley remarked that, after Criss left Kiss for the first time in 1979, he became increasingly frustrated because he was always being outvoted by Stanley and Simmons [cited in Leaf and Sharp, (2003), p.338]. An Amazon.com customer reviewer, Kit Sullivan of Kissimmee, Florida, writes perceptively that: “Simmons is … the aggressive, single-minded success-driven money-making machine …, and his strong-willed personality runs roughshod over those who do not share his passion for success…namely Ace Frehley and Peter Criss”.²

Could it be that Simmons’ later ideology was built upon his understanding of the American Dream, which specifically provided room for his chosen lifestyle of excesses, which include (to summarise concisely) bedding every woman and maximising the rate of return on capital? Leaf and Sharp (2003, p.140) write that: “Gene and Stanley are the epitome of American entrepreneurial spirit, they are the epitome of drive, commitment, and persistence”. American entrepreneurial spirit and the American Dream are not exactly the same thing³ but the Dream lifestyle is usually seen as the deserved product of the entrepreneurial spirit in action. Those who get rich from sustained entrepreneurial efforts are more consistent with the American Dream than is the successful Lotto winner. In a sense, Simmons was, following sociologist Georg Simmel’s ‘stranger-observer’ figure, both an ‘insider’ and an ‘outsider’. He had lived in Israel under his birth name, Chiam Witz, from his birth in 1949 up until his mother’s emigration to New York City in 1958 [Leaf and Sharp, (2003), pp.4–10]. Decades later he expresses his continued appreciation for the American nation which literally rescued members of his family from Nazi concentration camps. Simmons spent much of his childhood and teenage years trying to understand the incomprehensible American culture [Leaf and Sharp, (2003), pp.4–10]. The Dream ideology was discovered by him as something foreign and fresh and it seems to have been viewed with the innocence that one might expect from a foreign-born immigrant child. In New York City Simmons grew up using the name Gene Klein and later adopted the Anglicized stage surname Simmons when he joined bands. He may have appreciated that an Anglicized name was a part of the American Dream and possibly even a pre-requisite.⁴
In an interview with Paul Elliott for his 2009 book *Kiss: Hotter than Hell*, Simmons expounds upon his American Dream beliefs as applied to both Kiss and the fans:

“The reason why the American message is accepted so readily by everybody in the four corners of the world is because it espouses those great universal truths which we all aspire to. Life is better worth living well than not, and aspiring to greatness doesn’t mean that I’m better than you are, but that everybody should have a chance to get up there. The great American dream is that anybody can be President, anybody can be a millionaire. In America, you’re damn right! ... I also don’t understand suicide. Why would anybody want to end their life when every day above ground is a gloriously wonderful day? I can’t understand anybody who doesn’t get that. You may have to dig ditches on a highway, but when you get back home you have a great meal, you have a woman in bed ... all those things that make life worth living.” [Cited in Elliott (2009, p.14, p.21)]

The implied and explicit message of modern day Kiss is that we should all go out and do what we can to emulate Simmons and Stanley, although, not everyone can, even in the fullness of time, end up rich which is the ‘warning’ label on the American Dream packaging. (Unfortunately, the warning is written in tiny letters and it is frequently overlooked.) However, as Simmons explicitly tells us (above), we can all work an honest nine-to-five job and then come home to our woman (or man). This seems to be the ideological recompense or substitute for the warning clause which points out that we cannot all end up rich. Although we would love to be rich, and a select few can and will be, it doesn’t really matter as we can at least ‘work all day and uh all night’. Kiss ideologically suggests that we can survive life emotionally without the benefits that the rich are able to experience and appropriate for themselves. The lyrics to Kiss’ ‘Uh All Night’ begin as follows: ‘Everywhere around the world/Everybody’s doin’ time/Freedom comes at 5:15/Prison starts at quarter to nine’. This is the ‘work-is-drudgery’ thesis associated, on the left wing of philosophy, with the hero of the American counter-culture of the 1960s (Marcuse, 1964, 1966). However, Kiss sees the ‘solution’ in terms of one’s love interest rather than through a revolution in the mode of production or through worker empowerment (see lyrics to ‘Uh All Night’ as well as Simmons’ interview responses cited above). Loverboy expressed the same idea equally clearly in its famous 1981 song ‘Working for the Weekend’ which is totally suited for Friday night ball-park consumption although not quite so encouraging for that Monday morning drive to the factory or the office. Like Bon Jovi and Tommy, the ‘union man’, in that band’s ‘Livin’ on a Prayer’ [Walser, (1993), pp.121–123], everyone was slightly socialist during the Reagan era but only in the mushy sense of lamenting the lack of home-town jobs, lack of solidarity, and weakened community spirit caused by the neo-liberal preoccupation with GDP and other economic statistics. There is little room here for organised left-wing politics. The sentiments are just as easily likely to lead to small-town fascism, the fascist-punk worldview of the English band Skrewdriver, and the logic of the English Defence League.5

As the highly respected academic musicologist Walser (1993) writes, Bon Jovi in ‘Livin’ on a Prayer’ presents bourgeois, romantic love as sufficient motivation to persevere in life when in reality the song is discussing real social and economic problems which need addressing in those realms.6 Likewise, Kiss has stated that it is not a ‘political band’. Ideology works most effectively when it is not clearly seen as ideology (and Kiss’ American Dream references may be reduced somewhat in effectiveness by their lack of subtlety). As the UK-based sociologist of extreme-metal music Kahn-Harris (2007,
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pp.152–153) points out, in his *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*, Norwegian black-metal band Darkthrone has also claimed not to be a ‘political band’ even though it had ‘Norwegian Aryan Black Metal’ written on its *Transylvanian Hunger* CD packaging! Who was deceiving who here or was Darkthrone deceiving itself through its use of very narrow implied definitions of ‘politics’ and ‘political behaviour’? Using the Darkthrone example to support his more general point, Kahn-Harris (2007, p.154) writes that: “For extreme metal scene members, music [very conveniently] connotes the scene and politics [very conveniently] connotes that which is outside the scene”.

The lyrics to ‘Uh all Night’ continue as follows (in the chorus): “Well, there’s just one thing that money cannot buy/ When your body’s been starved feed your appetite/ When you work all day, you gotta Uh! All night”. Importantly, it seems that sex *per se* is not here the proffered ideological solution to the ‘work-is-drudgery’ dilemma. Money can buy sex but it cannot buy sexual love, and that is the only possible meaning here although it is not spelled out in black and white. Stanley co-wrote these lyrics, and not Simmons [who was heavily involved with his Hollywood acting activities around the time of the *Asylum* (1985) album]. Clearly, these lyrics are more compatible with Stanley’s sensitive and loving onstage Star Child persona than with Simmons’ hateful Demon persona. However, Simmons presumably would have rejected the song had he disagreed vehemently enough with the lyrics. It looks as though he too could then and can now see the benefits of the sale of ideology to the heavy-metal masses. However, this conclusion may be somewhat harsh as the Kiss members were all from loving homes, and all but Simmons came from conventional nuclear families where at least the father had regular work. Even Simmons, to people’s great surprise, was smitten by what appeared to be a classic case of ‘falling in love’ on the Japanese tour of 1977 when he consolidated his new relationship with Cher via long-distance telephone calls. Of course only a rock star such as Simmons could afford to make USD 2,000 of long distance telephone calls whilst on tour overseas. These relationships were never, at any stage, intended to be anything other than ‘open’ ones as the thought of Simmons denying himself while on tour is, of course, inconceivable. It is likely that Kiss intended the ideology being sold in this song to extend only to ‘closed relationships’. In other words, Kiss, by this time, was selling its fans something different from what the band members themselves were enjoying. Ideology does not require that the people disseminating it either believe it in it sincerely or do not believe in it sincerely. For example, Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev appeared to have sincerely believed in Marxist-Leninism whereas Lavrenti Beria, the notorious head of the NKVD People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (*Народный комissarий внутренних дел* *Narodnyy komissariat vnutrennikh del*, NKVD), at least according to his son Beria (2001) did not. It was not cynicism that caused Beria’s protests against the Stalinist regime to be muffled but fear for himself and for his family. If the fans have regular work it also means, of course, that they have the money to buy concert tickets and the ever-increasing array of Kiss merchandise for themselves and for their families. The ideological ‘solution’ begins to work out rather nicely.

The previously cited Amazon.com customer reviewer, Kit Sullivan of Kissimmee, Florida, contrasts, perpectively, the ‘real story’ of Kiss with “the homogenized, revisionist-history crap that Gene Simmons and Paul Stanley spew at every opportunity”.

The ‘homogenised revisionist’ history we believe is closely tied to the utilisation of the American Dream ideology (which began around 1985 with ‘Uh All Night’). Let us explain: The homogenised revisionist history charts, retrospectively, Kiss’ ‘planned’ and ‘calculated’ journey to mega-stardom, whilst avoiding providing a detailed
account of the band’s and band members’ messy early years (when the first three studio albums sold poorly); the ‘ongoing Human Resource Management issues’ involving the now ex-members Ace Frehley and Peter Criss; the unfortunate early deaths of two band members (Eric Carr, Mark St. John); a lawsuit involving another ex-member (Vinnie Vincent); and the plunge in Kiss’ popularity in the early-1980s (which led firstly to the removal of make-up for 1983’s *Lick It Up* and eventually to the 1996 reunion of the original four with the make-up back on). Only in recent years (post-1985) have Simmons’ and Stanley’s American Dream ideology emerged as a coherent body of beliefs designed to specify the band’s purpose and enhance its legitimacy.

Whilst Simmons’ and Stanley’s vision for the band is and has always been hegemonic, the authors are also very much aware of the fans’ affections for the lovable ‘Kiss outcasts’, namely early members Ace Frehley and Peter Criss both of whom rejoined the band for the 1996 reunion, then left for the second time (and we presume final time) early in the new millennium. In fact, Frehley’s ‘Space Ace’ and Criss’ ‘Cat’ make-up are now being worn by current members of the band Tommy Thayer (guitar) and Eric Singer (drums) respectively. Part of the genius of early Kiss was that the four made-up personas (Demon, Star Child, Space Ace, and Cat) were extensions, simplifications, and generalisations of the essences of each of the real-life personalities underneath the masks rather than completely fictional fabrications. The popularity of Kiss, which is directly correlated with the band’s genius (and marketing efforts), is evident in the fact that The Corporate Kiss Machine turned over USD111 million in calendar year 1978 alone, equal to that of a Fortune 500 company, half of which was from merchandising (Leaf and Sharp, 2003). One of the often overlooked points in Volume 1 of Marx’s (1976) *Capital* is that surplus-value, whilst produced in the factory, is ‘realised’ in the marketplace. In other words, if no-one wants to buy your product(s) under capitalism then all the value and surplus-value contained within the products is lost. Kiss had products which, generally speaking and excluding large swathes of the ‘lost years’ from around 1979–1995, people wanted to buy.

In Leaf and Sharp’s (2003) unauthorised Kiss biography, the band members are put on the spot as to whether their personas in fact ‘represent them’ or, in other words, are in relative harmony with their actual personalities. To what extent do the members begin ‘acting’ when they put on their make-up? Only Frehley suggests that his persona was completely separate from himself. Criss goes halfway towards this by saying that he felt some stress in putting his Cat make-up back on for the reunion tour as if the Cat put pressure on him by essentializing his inherent complexity as a human being in the interests of showmanship. Possibly one reason why the make-up was removed officially in 1983 (aside from the fact that the four studio albums commencing with 1979’s *Dynasty* sold poorly in North America) was that it was perceived that the made-up personas had reached the point of reification, in the Marxist sense, i.e., they had become separate from the band members and had begun to imprison them from the outside (Marx, 2007; Marx and Engels, 1932). The personas were very special for fans because, possibly, they represented each of the four archetypal personality types: choleric (Demon), sanguine (Star Child), phlegmatic (Space Ace), and melancholic (Cat). Cats have a reputation for moodiness and, in real life, it is established that Criss was the most moody of the original four members of Kiss (Leaf and Sharp, 2003). It might be said that the masked men of today’s Slipknot, who all wear red-boiler suits with numbers on the back, represent the logical latter-day extension of Kiss; the alienated ‘Post Modern Men’ of Slipknot have now penetrated even to the sacred heart of the American heartland, Des Moines, Iowa.
However, this would be a faulty interpretation as Slipknot emerged in the 1990s, a decade for the celebration of existential anguish and alienation in heavy-metal music (see, for example, archetypal 1990s heavy-metal bands such as Biohazard, Cannibal Corpse, Deicide, Korn, Limp Bizkit, Linkin Park, Morbid Angel, Obituary, Pantera, and Sepultura as well as the early-1990s Seattle grunge scene). Harris (2000) documents how Brazil’s Sepultura began with the clichéd quasi-Satanic stance of black-metal before progressing to lyrics which reflect existential social-realist struggle against poverty, corruption, and dictatorship rooted in the Brazilian context. For Slipknot, the masks directly represent and even celebrate alienation (‘alienation for the youth mass consumer market’ if you like). For Kiss, the masks, originally inspired by Japanese Kabuki theatre, only indirectly hint at or suggest alienation because obviously the members of Kiss understood in 1973–1974 that the masks were a better selling point than naked human faces. However, the masks also aim to surmount alienation with the alternative empowering message being that each of the archetypal four personality types is acceptable and worthy of promotion, affirmation, and celebration. This hints at aspects of the American Dream, since the Dream is all about you, as unique Christian individual, surmounting obstacles and bending and manipulating the world to suit your own particular personality and agendas.

It is extremely interesting that the modern-day hard-rock band, Black Spiders, have released a song ‘Kiss Tried to Kill Me (it was Gene not Paul)’. This song is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it shows the strong influence that the original Kiss had on young Generation-X music fans in the late-1970s. Kiss is arguably only the second band in rock music history, after the Beatles, where it has been considered normal and sufficient to refer to each band member by his first name only. Secondly, the song shows that the personas were widely understood and appreciated by pre-teen fans ‘back in the day’, and that this understanding has not been lost over time. It is logical to the fans that the song says that Gene not Paul tried to kill him, Gene being the hateful Demon and Paul the romantic Star Child. It is well known that Stanley has penned or co-penned nearly all of the band’s love songs and ballads such as ‘C’mon and Love Me’ from Dressed to Kill (1975); ‘Do You Love Me?’ from Destroyer (1976); ‘I was Made for Loving You’ and ‘Sure Know Something’ from Dynasty (1979); ‘I Still Love You’ from Creatures of the Night (1982) (the last studio album from the first make-up era); and ‘Forever’ from Hot in the Shade (1989). By contrast, Simmons’ songs have always tended to reflect and exploit his Demon persona (note that the songs ‘support’ the marketing images rather than vice-versa). ‘God of Thunder’, from Destroyer, is now the song most generally perceived among the fan base to be the trademark ‘Gene song’ [Leaf and Sharp, (2003), p.262]. We conclude that Black Spiders’ song title, ‘Kiss Tried to Kill Me (it was Gene not Paul)’, is a treat and coded signal for insiders, Kiss fans, who remember and appreciate not only Simmons and Stanley but their now legendary two personas as well.

3 The unashamed commodification of the Space Ace and the Catman in recent years

Whilst Kiss took the logic of commodification within late capitalism to a further place of previously unimagined and unimaginable excess, it was originally understood that each of the four had the right to develop the personality of his persona – albeit within certain limits. Indeed, while the fans may have identified with the representation of alienated
man as seen by the face masks, Kiss proved existentially, especially via Frehley and Criss, that raw idiosyncratic and rebellious humanity, of the distinctly NYNY-proletarian type, could never be completely contained. Simmons and Stanley are probably smart enough to understand that the tension of this dialectic within the original Kiss was part of the reason behind the band’s great appeal: the make-up represented and symbolised anonymity and even interchangeability of personnel (more on this later), but each personality type in the band was encouraged to express himself through his unique persona. In fact, the act of wearing make-up absolutely contained within it, right from the outset, its dialectical opposite: fans wanted to know more about the reality of the four men behind the masks! [Leaf and Sharp, (2003), p.81]. Without the masks this curiosity would have been present on a much reduced scale, as would the affection that young Kiss fans felt for their favourite Kiss persona. During the non-make-up era, from 1983–1996, the new band members, the late Eric Carr, the late Mark St. John, Vinnie Vincent, Bruce Kulick, and Eric Singer, attracted only very minimal interest from new and old fans alike so that the reunion tour could only ever happen on the condition that Frehley and Criss came back into the band as the replacements for their replacements. The world of Kiss had almost turned full circle to the extent that the make-up was strictly uncool by 1983 but in vogue again at the time of the reunion tour as enough time had elapsed and the younger fans wanted to see Kiss in the make-up again. Kiss endured hard years but the Capitalist Kiss Machine adapted, waited, and came out on top – after the point where Kiss reached the place of reification within the consciousness of mainstream America. Eric Singer had even been a diehard fan of Kiss before he joined the band suggesting, despite Singer’s, Kulick’s, Vincent’s, Carr’s, and St. John’s undoubted musical brilliance, that Kiss in the 1980s had become little more than a tribute band. The same comment applies today now that Thayer and Singer have replaced Frehley and Criss but wear Frehley’s and Criss’ original Space Ace and Cat make-up. Typical of his hyper-rational and ultra-capitalist approach to Kiss, Simmons has bought the trademark on Frehley’s Space Ace make-up and Frehley is not permitted to wear that make-up when he performs on stage as a solo performer.

Frehley and Criss, still represent, even though no longer part of the band, the ‘revenge of the human’ or ‘the revenge of the unassimilable’ with respect to Simmons and Stanley’s modern day Kiss. They were both vital to the whole of the original Kiss although they created a permanent fault-line in the band, which dates back to the northern fall of 1974, and their self-discipline and reliability were repeatedly called into question. In 2010 Simmons speaks as follows about Frehley and Criss and that duo’s impact on the self-discipline and teamwork of the band:

“Make no mistake about it, teamwork is important. Who you surround yourself with will either help you go up the ladder or drag you straight to the pits of hell. You will be judged by the company you keep. And in plain English that means if you’re in a band with Ace Frehley or Peter Criss, who you love dearly as brothers but who became alcoholics and drug addicts and so on ... well, just cut the cancer out and move on.” [Cited in Barton (2010, p.46)]

Frehley and Criss are being defined here solely in terms of their drug-taking and alcoholic propensities. Nowadays Simmons is unwilling, just as a politician would be, to offer even a modicum of praise to those he now chooses not to work with. He is being dishonest here as it has always been Kiss as a band which has sold albums and merchandise and few fans have ever accepted any non-original Kiss member with the possible exception of the late Eric Carr (replacement for Criss from 1980–1991) who had
to work very hard for his acceptance by the fan base over his decade with the band. The reference to cancer by Simmons is also unfortunate given that it was brain cancer which took Carr’s life at a young age.

Both Frehley’s and Criss’ solo work appeals mostly to Kiss fans even today, and each one keeps up a discourse that uses to some extent the old Space Ace and Cat imagery. Like the rejected Bolshevik, Leon Trotsky, with respect to the ongoing Stalinist state of the 1930s, neither Frehley-Criss nor Trotsky makes any sense outside of the original context (Kiss and Bolshevik Russia respectively). For example, on his 2009 Anomaly solo album, Frehley unashamedly rejoices in his own continuing identity as the Space Ace as follows: “It’s like I told you/ I came from Outer Space/ That’s how I know your name/ Just like I told you/ I came from outer space/ I wanna’ take you away.” Likewise, the album packaging is littered with stars in a faux outer-space scene that juxtaposes interestingly with the post-Kiss ‘social-realism’ of the rest of the album packaging, where Frehley is presented without make-up, clad in a leather jacket, and perched atop a motorcycle.

Kiss fans seem intuitively aware of the Marxist insight that capitalism, as a ‘mode of production’, is a machine that always produces two products, wealth and poverty, both on ever-increasing scales (Mandel, 1976, 1978; Marx, 1976; Marx and Engels, 1992). There was a late-1980s rumour involving Criss being found as a homeless destitute drifter under a bridge in New York City (echoes of the Hollywood actor Montgomery Clift immortalised in the 1979 Clash song ‘The Right Profile’ on London Calling) and another, more recent rumour of Frehley having died from drugs in February 2007. Both rumours relate to a popular ex-member of Kiss at a time when that individual had been banished from the Corporate Kiss Machine. Although factually incorrect, both stories do contain some truth-content, in that Frehley and Criss represent the eternal ‘excluded human other’ of Simmons’ and Stanley’s Corporate Kiss Machine.

However, despite the above, hegemony is never total. Even in 2011 Simmons and Stanley are being forced to explain to fans and music journalists why the band’s two newcomers, Thayer and Singer, have not been given newly invented personas but instead wear the Space Ace and Cat make-up generally associated with Frehley and Criss. Why were the newcomers not given new personas as, for example, Vinnie Vincent was given the persona of the Wizard and Egyptian ankh make-up? It appears that Kiss is now deliberately trading in deception hoping that younger and casual fans attracted to the band either do not know or do not care that the two original personas in question originally belonged to other people. Simmons’ answer to fans about this issue, as told to Classic Rock journalist Geoff Barton, is reproduced here:

“We’ve been there, done that. We’ve worn make-up; we haven’t worn make-up. We tried The Fox [Eric Carr] and The Wizard [Vinnie Vincent], The Ankh, and then we decided to go back to basics. If you are worthy of wearing the crown, the uniform, then you should. And if you’re not worthy of wearing it, you shouldn’t. We tried new personas and then went back to the classic ones. As simple as that.” [Cited in Barton, (2010, p.49)]

From the purely commercial perspective, these arguments are logical because in the business world no-one is expendable. The undercurrent is that Simmons and Stanley are the equivalent of corporate board members who have made a ‘management decision’ according to the principle of ‘management prerogative’. However, fans are much more passionate and emotional about their favourite band members than shareholders are about which board of directors is presently running their company. Many long-term fans would
agree with the assertion that, contra to Simmons’ statements, Singer and Thayer, rather than Frehley and Criss, are the ones unworthy to wear the Space Ace and the Cat make-up. In the terms of Barthes (2009), ‘Space Ace’ (‘Catman’) is now the signifier and ‘Ace Frehley’ (‘Peter Criss’) the generally understood signified within the world of heavy-rock music. Given that Singer was a dedicated fan of the original Kiss before he joined the band, the argument that modern day Kiss is little more than a tribute band carries weight.

Both the greatness of, and the problem with the original Kiss was that, whilst Simmons’ Demon and Stanley’s Star Child caricatured Hate and Romantic Love (Eros), respectively, and easily slotted into conventional Hollywood categories, the Space Ace and the Cat retained unassimilable elements that allowed Frehley and Criss to develop their personas. They subsequently appeared to incorporate more of the personal realities of the real individuals underneath their masks. Walser (1993, pp.108–136) argues that transcendence and control make up the dialectic of 1980s heavy-metal music.14 We argue that Space Ace and Cat represent transcendence within the original Kiss concept, as does Star Child to an extent, and both are the antithesis of the controlling Demon. Space Ace, literally, is not bound to this earth and a Cat, metaphorically, is credited with nine lives and the alleged ability to cheat death. Both Frehley and Criss’ personas thus directly symbolise transcendence. Hence, they were extremely popular among the fan base and a vital part of the original Kiss package. The famous Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami, author of Norwegian Wood, had a Tokyo jazz club named ‘Peter Cat’. The back cover of Rubin’s (2005) book on Murakami states that: “As a young man, Haruki Murakami played records and mixed drinks at his Tokyo jazz club, Peter Cat, then wrote at the kitchen table until the sun came up”. Although this club was not ostensibly named after Peter Criss it is unlikely that the westernised Murakami would have been ignorant of the Peter Criss associations. The use of the name ‘Peter Cat’ by Murakami’s Tokyo club suggests that the mythical status of Peter Criss (signified) and his Cat persona (signifier) is capable of being transported across cultural, ethnic, and national boundaries whilst retaining much of its original meaning (in the same way that there is today a thriving death-metal scene in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia).15

The departure of Frehley and Criss from the band and the wearing of the original Space Ace and Cat personas by the two newcomers reduce Kiss’ existential authenticity in a very real way. Simmons and Stanley have effectively re-essentialized the Space Ace and the Cat, cloning and channelling Frehley’s and Criss’ interpretation of the personas in perpetuity. Frehley and Criss, the two ‘Troitskys in the revolution’, and now as always best friends in real life, have been cast out of the Kingdom, having been replaced by two characterless cadres of the Stalinist machine. And yet their memory will always be there, much like the spectres of Marx (and the myth of Lenin for Stalin), to remind fans and even Simmons and Stanley of a humbler, nicer, more charming and humorous, and perhaps less misogynistic, less controllable, and less mercenary Kiss.

In fact, the Space Ace onstage nightly is a permanent reminder of Frehley, a reminder much more obvious than if the current guitarist was given a new persona in the same way that, for example, the late Eric Carr had a Fox persona. Simmons is probably aware of the situation that he and Stanley have created: Frehley’s and Criss’ humanity (they were never reducible to their personas) are literally re-essentialised (cloned) and sold again each concert night for the financial gain of Simmons, Stanley, Thayer, and Singer. Real authenticity and humanity, littered with weaknesses and failings, is in fact what sells (and, to cite Dave Mustaine of the thrash-metal band Megadeth, we’re buying). The Wikipedia
‘I was made for loving you’ 463

‘Peter Criss’ page cites Criss’ statement about Kiss touring with people wearing the Space Ace and Cat make-up as follows: “No matter who they get to put stuff on their face, it ain’t us [Frehley and Criss]. You can take the mask off the Lone Ranger and put it on someone else, but it ain’t the Lone Ranger”.16

Hardcore Kiss devotees from the ‘early days’ also remember Eric Carr’s sad early death from cancer in New York City’s Bellevue Hospital on the Lower East Side in November of 1991.17 This proletarian and very painful death can be contrasted with Simmons’ and Stanley’s apparent desire to keep their band ever young and ever marketable (although, paradoxically, it appears it is Frehley and Criss who still sell today rather than Thayer and Singer).

The ultimate answer to the unpleasant facts of ageing and death for Simmons and Stanley might be Kiss reproducing itself for all eternity, much like English Premier League (EPL) football clubs or teams in the USAs National Basketball Association (NBA), where old players are constantly being replaced by new and only the classic team shirt remains. It is not impossible that Kiss becomes the first perpetual rock band of this sort; the make-up gives the band a considerable advantage over its competitors in this regard. In fact Eric Singer cites NBA team, Los Angeles Lakers, in his 2010 response to a fan question about people other than Frehley and Criss wearing the Space-Ace and Cat make-up. We reproduce Singer’s response here:

“I don’t get emotional about it [putting on the Space Ace make-up and costume]. I look at it like it’s putting on a uniform and there’s a job to do. I’ve never taken an emotional stance on the thing. I’m a big basketball fan. Take The Lakers as an example. They have a uniform they wear; it’s purple and gold. The team has evolved throughout the years, but it’s always The Lakers. They have the standard of being the most successful basketball team, and they have the legacy of that uniform. To me, that’s how you have to look at Kiss. It’s a big job. There’s a standard to bear.” [Cited in Barton (2010, p.49)]

Not surprisingly, the logic here is unassailable if we take it for granted that the primary purposes of a musical band are to maximise the rate of return on capital (Bryer, 1994, 1995, 1999, 2006) and ensure its own longevity. The sentence “they have the legacy of that uniform” is applied to both The Lakers and Kiss and assumed to be completely valid in both cases. It assumes that a team exists as an abstract entity above the individuals contained within it and the fans contained outside it at the margins. As we noted, this conforms to the Marxist understandings of terms reification and alienation (Marx, 2007; Marx and Engels, 1932). We argue that the sentence has somewhat more validity when applied to The Lakers given that corporate logic and arguments have long held sway in American professional basketball. However, it is clear that not all Kiss fans willingly view Kiss in this way.

Long-term Kiss devotees believe that the band is defined by the four original individuals so, to the extent that one or more of these members disappear, what you have left is somehow and somewhat ‘less Kiss’. At least if new members have new personas you have the honesty and authenticity of the original Kiss but possibly without all of its dynamism and charisma. It took a long time and much sincerity and generosity of spirit on his part for fans to accept Eric Carr, the first of the second-generation of non-originals to join Kiss. Carr is probably the only non-original that the majority of long-time Kiss fans have ever truly accepted. The suggestion that the band belongs to the fans must be taken seriously. The fans gave Kiss its success and surely it is the fans who are the final arbiters of the ‘legacy’ of the “uniform” or, in Kahn-Harris’ (2007, p.7, p25, p119,
pp.121–139, p.141) words, in the spirit of Pierre Bourdieu, the value of the ‘sub-cultural capital’.18

4 Conclusions

Bryer (1994, 1995, 1999, 2006) writes that the goal of accounting under capitalism is to serve capital by the regular reporting of the rate of return on capital to equity holders. For Jinnai (2009), following Marx, accounting is the ‘brain’ or the ‘self-consciousness’ of capital as a living organism. This paper has been a collective effort on the part of the authors to remember ‘Kiss’, one of the greatest shock-rock bands of the mid- to late-1970s. The Corporate Kiss Machine turned over USD111 million in calendar year 1978 alone, equal to that of a Fortune 500 company, half of which was from merchandising. In accounting and financial terms the Kiss of the mid- to late-1970s was a huge success, achieving the goals of capitalist self-valorisation to an extent previously unimaginable. Kiss branched out beyond sales of musical product to sales of a vast array of merchandise and memorabilia which nearly certainly has not yet been surpassed by any band in terms of the quantity and the range of items sold. Kiss showed how far it was possible to extend and exploit the concept of a band for the purpose of capital accumulation. The band is one of modern capitalism’s greatest and most surprising of success stories. The band demonstrated that capitalism could successfully control areas of human activity previously only on the fringes of mainstream capitalist economy.

The authors have also looked at the band’s use of the American Dream ideology to assist its success. Furthermore, we have studied the possibility that Kiss can become the first ever ‘perpetual rock band’ in music history with old members regularly being replaced by new but the four original made-up personas remaining the same. Will someone other than Gene Simmons ever take the stage for Kiss wearing the Demon make-up? In one of his books Simmons (2006, p.206) raises and then neither discounts nor opposes this possibility. We have cited Eric Singer’s comparison of The Los Angeles Lakers NBA basketball team and Kiss. Within the logic of corporate capitalism, Singer’s argument may well be proven correct with Kiss continuing in perpetuity. Perhaps, like Nike sneakers made in the Third World, the only difference between the ‘genuine’ and the ‘fake’ Kiss in future will be the ability of the ‘real’ Kiss to sue for breach of trademark and possibly also for defamation. In the same way not just anyone can call their basketball club The Los Angeles Lakers.

Simmons’ message to Frehley and other modern day detractors19 is: “And yet, despite what Ace or anyone else might think, KISS can and will go on without him”. Simmons (2006, p.253) writes: “KISS will continue!!!” Maybe not in the way we originally envisioned it, but it WILL continue!!!” We have been warned! Indeed Simmons’ business philosophy is: “Revenge is having them all work for you” [Simmons, (2006), p.256]. Simmons (2006, p.206) says: “Will Ace be back? Probably. Will he be welcome? Absolutely. Family is forever. But family will not stand still while one member decides to take some time off”. If Kiss is indeed a ‘family’ then a ‘family business’, with attention firmly focused on the bottom-line, may be a more complete description. You can only ‘come back’ on Kiss’s terms! Will Peter Criss, now aged in his sixties, rejoin Kiss for one last stint back at the manufacturing plant?
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References


Notes

1 Although excessive consumption by shareholders can hardly be said to be non-capitalist behaviour (outside the Weberian ‘Protestant work ethic’ framework), Frehley and Criss were also ‘senior managers’ of the band and their excessive consumption was detrimental to the band in the long term.


3 We thank one of this paper’s anonymous reviewers for bringing this important point to our attention.

4 Paul Stanley (born Stanley Eisen) is also Jewish. Peter Criss is Irish-Italian-American Roman Catholic whilst Frehley is of mixed background which includes German and Native American. All but Simmons were from upper working-class nuclear families, living in Upper Manhattan or the outer boroughs, where at least the father had regular work.


6 The first-mentioned author has heard this song ‘Livin’ on a Prayer’ blasting out of the karaoke bars in Singapore’s Chinatown area late at nights, filling the ancient empty streets with cheerful noise. The Filipina hostesses who work these bars are mostly poor women with a high percentage of single mothers. Their children, parents, and often their boyfriends and spouses, are back home in the Philippine provinces. The romantic love that Bon Jovi sings about must seem a far-away and somewhat irrelevant dream for these working girls, detached from all family and community. An estimated 30% of Filipino children presently grow up with one or both parents working overseas.

7 This is not to suggest that Kiss is or ever has been ‘extreme-metal’ music. However, Kahn-Harris’s (2007) comment retains validity when applied to Kiss.

8 Simmons later dated the singer Diane Ross.


10 While some of the 1990s bands emphasise alienation from God and religious authorities, others focus on alienation from one’s true nature, from society, and from government. Beyond this dichotomy perhaps, Yonkers, NYs Immolation stress that the band members are not Satanists (see online interview with Ross Dolan of Immolation available at: http://www.chroniclesofchaos.com/articles/chats/1-241_immolation.aspx, interview dated 7 July 1999, accessed 2 February 2011). The band’s complex lyrics depict religious alienation and angst in existential terms but also present this religious alienation as a sociological phenomenon. Genuine existential anguish is communicated in those lyrical passages which suggest that the band members wish that they could believe but just do not find belief inside them once they have no choice but to go beyond innocent childlike, but ultimately untested, faith in God and his world (see, for example, ‘Reluctant Messiah’ from 2002’s *Unholy Cult* and ‘Our Saviour Sleeps’ from 2005’s *Harnessing Ruin*).

11 An additional source of alienation occurred in the late-1980s and early-1990s for heavy-metal fans when the once unified genre of heavy-metal splintered into various sub-genres such as black-, death-, power-, thrash- and nu-metal and grindcore, hardcore, and metalcore (Baulch, 2003; James, 2009; James and Tolliday, 2009; Kahn-Harris, 2007; Moynihan and Søderlind, 2003; Mudrian, 2004; Phillipov, 2006; Popoff, 2007; Purcell, 2003). Each sub-genre became increasingly rigid as the 1990s progressed with the ethics and ethos of one sub-genre rarely being transportable into another. This situation has improved somewhat in the 2000s with the surprise resurgences of power-metal and thrash-metal and the dying down of the black-metal
trend. If any one band could be credited with reigniting these two sub-genres it would be HammerFall for power-metal and Municipal Waste for thrash-metal.

12 After his excursions into Hollywood acting in the mid-1980s (he played minor roles in the albums from 1982s Creatures of the Night through to 1989s Hot in the Shade), Simmons returned to contribute the strong songs 'Domino' and 'Unholy' to 1992s Revenge album.

13 From 'Outer Space' lyrics [online] http://www.metrolyrics.com/outer-space-lyrics-ace-frehley.html, with slight modification by the authors based on how we personally hear the lyrics (accessed 23 September 2010).

14 1980s heavy-metal music is, of course, a field of music Kiss strongly influenced and also tried to participate in, despite the presence of a new breed of hungrier and mostly younger bands arriving on the scene in the early-1980s, especially those from the ‘Sunset Strip’ of West Hollywood (for example, Dokken, Ratt, Mötley Crüe, Quiet Riot, and Stryper).

15 On the Bandung death-metal scene see James et al. (2011) and the band interviews at: http://www.busukwebzine666.blogspot.com (accessed 8 December 2011).


17 Bellevue Hospital is right in Ace Frehley territory and only a short walk north up First Avenue from the notorious punk venue CBGBs, where the Ramones started out. In the very early days of Kiss, after Simmons and Stanley had left Wicked Lester, the band, then a threesome of Simmons, Stanley and Criss, rehearsed in a rented rehearsal room at East 10 23rd Street on the Lower East Side at Fifth Avenue. This was in the fall of 1972 [Leaf and Sharp, (2003), p.21, pp.32–34, p.209]. Even before that, Wicked Lester members, Steve Coronel and Brooke Ostrander, report that Wicked Lester, including Simmons and Stanley, had had a rehearsal loft on the corner of Mott and Canal Streets in Chinatown, a fifth-floor walk-up. This was in September of 1970 [cited in Leaf and Sharp (2003, p.194)]. Although all of the original Kiss foursome grew up outside of Lower Manhattan (Simmons in the Williamsburg area of Brooklyn, after emigrating from Israel with his mother in 1958, before moving to the Jackson Heights section of Queens in 1961; Stanley in Upper Manhattan, 211th and Broadway, and then Kew Gardens in Queens; Criss in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn; and Frehley in the Mosholu Parkway section of the Bronx), Kiss’ spiritual home is arguably the Lower East Side. When the first-mentioned author was taken to the A&E section at Bellevue Hospital in the northern summer of 2010 he had time to remember and pay mental respects to Eric Carr.

18 Of course a band always has the choice of seeking out a less demanding and/or less nostalgic group of fans but the disenchanted are hard to ban from online music websites where they will continue to express their disenchantment which we saw happen with Metallica and its fans during that band’s long creative barren period in the 1990s and early-2000s (James and Tolliday, 2009).

19 This phrase is a pun on the single and opening track ‘Modern Day Delilah’ from Kiss’ 2009 Sonic Boom album.